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GRAHAM, KENTUCKY, 1903-1957:

A SHORT HISTORY
OF THE
W.G.DUNCAN COAL COMPANY

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In February, 1904, the Graham-Skibo mine, Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, produced 4749.30 tons of coal. This initial month of mining at the site began an enterprise that was to last fifty-three years, weather numerous recessions and depressions, ~~and~~ benefit during two world wars, and eventually succumb to the ever-changing technological and industrial advances of the present age.¹

The mine was at one time the largest of its kind in western Kentucky, and was for most of its existence, the largest in Muhlenberg County.² These statistics are indeed impressive, especially when one considers the number of mines that have operated in the Western Kentucky Coal Field region since 1900.

Like all successful business ventures, the Graham-Skibo mine owes much to superior management, that sometime elusive quality that separates the best from the rest. Founded by the W. G. Duncan Coal Company in 1903, the mine was blessed with just such superior leadership.

William Graham Duncan, president and founder of the company, had been associated with coal and the coal industry for most of his life. Born in Scotland on September 4, 1851, the son of a coal miner, he came to America with

¹W.G. Duncan Coal Company, Record Book, Hamilton R. Duncan Papers, Greenville, Kentucky, 12.

²Otto Rothert, A History of Muhlenberg County (2nd ed., Louisville, 1964), 401, 396, 397.

his family in 1855, settling in Pennsylvania. That same year, his father decided to re-locate at Airdrie, Kentucky, the site of a coal mine-iron works operated by another Scotsman, Alexander Hendrie. When Airdrie was abandoned as a futile enterprise, William's father, Andrew went into business for himself, operating coal mines near Airdrie and Paradise, both located in Muhlenberg County.³

William, by this time a young man, ventured into the coal-mining business himself, first in Ohio County with the McHenry Coal Company, and finally in 1900, back in Muhlenberg, with the newly organized W. G. Duncan Coal Company, at Luzerne.⁴

For the position of Vice-President and Treasurer, Duncan chose Charles Wesley Taylor, a kinsman, by marriage, from McHenry. Growing up on a farm there in Ohio County, Taylor managed to work his way through Transylvania University's business and accounting school, graduating in 1882. Two years later, he began working for the McHenry Coal Company and consequently became friends with W. G. Duncan.⁵

For the positions of Secretary and Mining Engineer, Duncan chose his two sons, Andrew W. Duncan and W. G. Duncan, Jr., respectively.

³Ibid., 401.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Charles W. Taylor, "A Geneology: James Conway Kelley-- Jennie Duncan," Charles W. Taylor Papers, Greenville, Kentucky.

The mine at Luzerne, located one and a half miles from the depot at Greenville, was a prosperous venture from the very first, so prosperous in fact that within three years, the company felt that it could successfully expand its facilities to include a new mine.

In April, 1903, the directors of the company authorized W. G. Duncan to close a deal with David Duncan and Company, for a large body of land and minerals,

lying West [sic] of the Luzerne property, and touching the Illinois Central Railroad at J. F. Doss' and L. L. Bridge's farm.⁶ Said tracts as a whole being known as the Graham property.⁷

Hoping to develop the new mine to a capacity of 1250 tons per day, the directors and officers of the company anticipated the following listing of expenditures:

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Amount due First National Bank: | \$27000.00 |
| Amount due Southern Coal Company: | 5000.00 |
| Amount to retire present bonded indebtedness: | 26500.00 |
| Mining Machinery: | 12500.00 |
| Railroad Switches: | 14000.00 |
| Engines, Drums, and Ropes: | 2000.00 |
| Two Small Tipples: | 3500.00 |
| Railroad Track and Scales: | 1500.00 |
| Blacksmith Shop and Tools: | 500.00 |
| Stable, Mules, and Wagons: | 2000.00 |
| Water Supply: | 1000.00 |
| Store House and Fixtures: | 2500.00 |
| Stock of Merchandise: | 4000.00 |
| 80 to 100 Dwellings: | 25000.00 |
| Development and Equipment of 2 openings, 700 tons per day: | 20659.50 |
| | <hr/> |
| total: | \$147659.50 ⁸ |

⁶W. G. Duncan Coal Company Minute Books, Vol. I, October 1, 1900 to July 28, 1914, H. R. Duncan Papers, 41.

⁷Ibid., 42, 43.

⁸Ibid., 46, 47.

Construction of the town and mining operation was begun that summer, in July, and continuing through the winter it was completed sufficiently enough to start producing coal by February, 1904. By the following July, production at the mine had climbed to 5076.95 tons for the month; the October tonnage was 8392.15 tons, and by the end of November, Graham produced 10813.05 tons for the month.⁹

The year 1904 had been a profitable one for the W.G. Duncan Coal Company and their new mine at Graham. Indeed, the year had been a good one for the nation as a whole. "That damn cowboy" in Washington had just finished his first term as president, and was not yet set on his course of progressivism. George Washington Plunkitt and his colleagues at Tammany Hall were making money from "honest graft." New York City was growing--it had opened its first section of subway service by October. The nation was moving and growing strong and true into the new century spread out in front of it. It was a time to build, to expand, and it was a time to make money.¹⁰ To the experienced business leaders and hopeful entrepreneurs of western Kentucky, money was to be made in coal.

W. G. Duncan and his still fledgling coal company began to meet the challenge of the era. To take advantage of the demand for coal from industry and the public, they

⁹Record Book, Duncan Papers, 12.

¹⁰Charles VanDoren, et. al., eds, Webster's Guide to American History (Springfield, Mass., 197;), 348.

opened a new slope at Graham, this one called "Skibo,"¹¹ which like its sister slope, provided no. 9 coal. A new opening meant more jobs and consequently more dwellings must be built to house the additional miners. In May of 1905, twenty-five new houses were authorized for the town. With increased production came an increase in the number of problems. To handle such outcroppings, the company decided to build a new carpentry shop, a new blacksmith shop and machine shop.¹²

The years of this century's first decade were indeed fruitful ones. Captains of industry were rolling along with the times. People were suffering to be sure--but New York City had almost always had its Harlem and Lower East Side; Chicago had likewise had its Levee. The nation had no income tax as yet and whatever the business man made was his to keep; the same was true for his employees.

Western Kentucky was no different from the rest of the nation. Some men made fortunes during the period, some men lost fortunes; employees worked for meager wages at some places, and other men and women enjoyed the fruits of industry along with their employers. The industrialists had the age in which they lived on their side; the workers had

¹¹H. R. Duncan, grandson of W. G. Duncan, says that his grandfather named this new slope after Andrew Carnegie's Scottish castle, Skibo; according to the younger Duncan, his grandfather had a great respect for the resourcefulness of America's "King of Steel." Interview with H. R. Duncan, July 17, 1973.

¹²Minute Book, I, 72.

the making of a new one on their side.

Life at Graham during this decade was one of plant and reap. The coal company was sowing a crop and anticipating a harvest. The miners were working the crop, but were also sharing in the harvest. For just as the company had the mood of the times working for it, the miners had the union and the hope of the future working for them. The union was still small and the future was still in the future, but miners at Graham, like miners, farmers, and other workers elsewhere, were still smiling and swaying to the tunes of "Sweet Adeline," "Down by the Old Mill Stream," and "Shine On, Harvest Moon." Wages were good, rent was still five dollars per month,¹³ and as long as the railroads supplied the cars, both the company and the miners would stay in business.

The next decade started badly for the W. G. Duncan Coal Company. Reports for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1911, showed an increase in the number of tons produced at Graham, from 326339.70 tons for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1910, to 366,461.68 tons. But on "account for our combined cost being higher and our selling price so low (due to new competition)," profit was substantially cut at the mine. Moreover, the President predicted that prospects for the year just begun were not "flattering" because of the low prices "all over the country." The stockholders of the company added another hitch by expressing their desire that

¹³W. G. Duncan Coal Company Rayroll Book, Vol. I, July, 1904 to March, 1915, H. R. Duncan Papers, Greenville, Kentucky, 30.

the directors make as few permanent improvements as possible and purchase only that equipment that was "absolutely necessary."¹⁴

As if to say that the economic picture for the coming years was not bad enough, another tragedy struck that punctuated the already dim forecast. On May 16, two miners, Raymond Hamilton and Peter Baker were killed.¹⁵

Aside from the economic situation of the period 1910 to 1920, the miners at Graham, with few exceptions, had what was as closely as could be obtained, an ideal mine and community. Accidents at Graham were few; death in the mines was rare. Partial credit for such accomplishments undoubtedly must go to the coal company. W. G. Duncan took an active interest in the lives of his miners and their families. Before hiring a new miner, Duncan always made it a policy to have a personal interview with the prospective employee. Only those men who showed an interest in their work, community, and religion were considered for employment. Consequently, most employees at Graham were skilled, conscientious miners.

Credit is also due the miners themselves. Anyone who has talked with a miner of this period is impressed with his constant reference to the dangers encountered underground. Had not the miners at Graham been so safety conscious, the casualty list there would have been much higher than it

¹⁴Minute Book, I, 110, 112.

¹⁵Ibid., 111.

eventually was.

Dangerous though it was, the miners were well prepared for their work, at least as well prepared as it was possible for the times. Graham-Skibo was one of the Coal Field's most modern mines.¹⁶ From the early tallow-lighting head gear, called "sunshine lamps," the miners progressed to the carbide types, the "Just-Rite" and "Guy Dropper." Eventually they changed to the more efficient electric lamps.¹⁷ As new technological innovations were discovered, the company made every effort to introduce them into their operation. Whether such activity was humanitarian or selfishly-oriented is of little importance. The fact remains that Graham-Skibo was, from its inception in 1903, until its demise in 1957, moving full-steam and straight-ahead in its quest to produce coal.

As world war began to look more and more like a possibility, the economic future of the mine began to improve. In 1916, conditions at the mine were such that a 90-day suspension of work had been necessary before a wage agreement with the workers could be negotiated. By 1917, demands for coal were so satisfactory that the company felt entirely safe spending money for a new power plant at the mine. April, 1917, saw the company's first dividend to stockholders in over three years. A year later, in 1918, the directors gave themselves a substantial increase in their salaries.¹⁸

¹⁷Interview with Bill Walker, July 23, 1973.

¹⁸Minute Book, II, April (?), 1915 to October 13, 1943, 62, 69.

As is the case with most wars, especially one the size of World War I, the economy is given a tremendous boost. When one considers the generation in which that war was fought, that is, a generation built on steam and coal, it is easy to imagine the influence that such an event as a war would have had for the coal industry. Production at Graham jumped from 274,356.13 tons in 1916, to 470,674.53 tons for 1917. The next year was equally as good-- 466,031.63 tons. By 1919, and the end of hostilities, production was back down to 274,991.64 tons.¹⁹

The 1920's were a time for change in the coal industry. Indeed, the decade witnessed one of America's most turbulent eras, both in business and society. Automobiles began to appear more and more; Sigmund Freud and H. L. Mencken attracted wide audiences; the motion picture industry began to develop new techniques and new stars. Disillusioned with the failures of progressivism and Woodrow Wilson, Americans had turned to sex and alcohol; from first glance it appeared that the whole country had gone wild.

The situation at Graham was not necessarily that far-fetched. To be true, the community did have more automobiles than ever before, and by 1922, it had a motion picture theatre. But closer investigation showed that the automobiles were sparingly used, and the theatre operated in the red for the first four years. By the first few years of the next decade, miners could not afford to

¹⁹Record Book, 36-42.

drive automobiles very much and by 1931, the theatre had closed its doors, operated for nine years at a total loss of \$5,574.11.²⁰

Just as wars tend to stimulate the economy, periods following wars tend to retard economic growth. It is generally, during these periods that social unrest also arises. That is the situation as it existed in Graham during the twenties.

Labor unions began to gain strength in the coal field. It is the recessions and depressions that foster labor uprisings--faced with an inflationary economy the miner sees higher wages as a possible remedy. This has been the case in almost every recession since 1893. Especially has this been true since 1920, when outside industry consumed less and less fuel from the Kentucky fields.²¹ Graham was to experience its worst labor dispute during just such a recession in Kentucky's economy.

Having felt the good working times that war affords, the miners became restless when the economy began to slacken in 1920. Coupled with the period of social unrest that the country was experiencing, the miners felt that an increase in wages was imperative to their vocation. This is true not only at Graham, but at other mines in the field.

The miners at Graham struck in April, 1924. Deter-

²⁰Ibid., 113.

²¹Thomas D. Clark, A History of Kentucky (Lexington, 1960), 404-405.

mining to stay struck until their demands were met, they obviously did not count on the company's stubbornness also, for the situation was not negotiated satisfactorily until late January, 1925, when both parties agreed to a contract based on the 1917 wage scales, a settlement that had been agreed upon by other operators in the field prior to this time.²²

The year 1929 was important for two reasons in connection with the Duncan Coal Company. The obvious one is that this was the year of the stockmarket crash. The other, and perhaps most important one, is that in June, W. G. Duncan died.²³

The loss of the company's patriarch was indeed a crushing blow. Duncan was the founder of the company and had been its guiding authority for over thirty years. He had been, along with vice-president Taylor, most instrumental in keeping the company together during its labor disturbances and economic setbacks. The loss of W. G. Duncan's steadying influence would be severely felt in the coming years.

While Americans were moaning to the refrain of "Brother Can You Spare A Dime," Duncan Coal Company was trying to make their own dimes stretch as far as they could. Dividends to stockholders were discontinued and improvements, other than minor repairs to existing facilities, were completely shut off. The company was producing coal as

²²Minute Book, II, 126, 127, 134.

²³The Greenville (Ky.) Leader, June 14, 1929.

regularly as ever, but demand, or more precisely, money to pay for such coal, was not being spent. America's coal industry, like all other big businesses, were in the midst of the greatest depression in the country's history.²⁴

Every four years, with each new presidential election, directors of the company expressed the hope that maybe, just maybe, a change of administration would bring relief. Unfortunately, the coal industry, along with the rest of America, had to wait until 1940 for that relief.

As the dawn of the century's fifth decade broke, the Duncan Coal Company found itself ready for action. The last ten years had been unfruitful, but not altogether futile. The company had weathered the continued strikes of its miners, fought the activity of the National Recovery Administration, and had lost another founder, C. W. Taylor. Nonetheless, by May, 1940, W. G. Duncan, Jr., was once again authorizing the spending of money in order to prepare the company for the anticipated upsurge in demand for coal due to the war in Europe.²⁵

The wait was not a long one. Total production for 1940 was 382,857.20 tons; by 1941, it had risen to 445,961.50 tons; 1942 - 675,985.85 tons; 1943-738,210.55 tons; and by 1944, the year of the Allies' great offensive, production had peaked to 872,512.25 tons. In five years, from 1940

²⁴See Minute Book, II, 185-210 for details of actual cost-cutting procedures followed by the company.

²⁵Minute Book, II, 306.

through 1944, total tonnage had almost trebled!²⁶

The years following World War II were much the same, economically, as those following the First World War. Duncan Coal Company still had to face drops in demand, rising costs of labor, and the ever-changing technological community. Already, technology had developed a new technique for mining coal--stripping--and Duncan Coal saw the need to instigate such a program with its own holdings. The change-over was initiated at its Luzerne mine first, and was not used at Graham until 1957.

A year earlier the following quotation was written into the minute books of the company:

...The Chairman gave a report covering results generally at both mines which showed considerable increase in volume of coal shipped but disappointing profits at the end of the Fiscal Year on March 31. It was apparent that production [sic] from the strip operation (Luzerne) showed a fair profit and that the underground operation at Graham had resulted in a loss. He expressed some hope that the Graham results would show some improvement...However, even under the best of conditions it appeared to him that it would be very difficult for underground mines in this area to compete with strip...²⁷

A trip through Muhlenberg County today graphically illustrates just how successful strip-mining has been in the area. The once bustling villages and mining towns of yesterday are now replaced by strip pits filled with copperous water. The town of Graham is now partially gone--

²⁶Record Book, 84-92.

²⁷Minute Book, III, January 7, 1944 to May 16, 1956, 233.

eaten away by the powerful steel jaws of machinery. The days of loading "sixteen tons, number nine coal" have given way to loading more than tentimes that amount. Perhaps we lost something forever when we extinguished the old "Just-Rites" and "Guy Droppers." Perhaps it was for the best, but who is to say? A close look at the history of Graham-Skibo mine seems to indicate that it was not.

Sources- A
Critical Essay

Undoubtedly the most important source for this study was the Hamilton R. Duncan Papers (Greenville, Kentucky). A collection of the W. G. Duncan Coal Company manuscripts, the papers contained the complete minutes, in three volumes, of the company's meetings since 1900. Also included in the papers are record books, inventories, and payroll rosters.

Of second importance was Otto Rother, A History of Muhlenberg County (2nd ed., Louisville, 1964), a scholarly and most complete history for that area until 1913. The volume is important for its periphery and background information.

The Charles W. Taylor Papers (Greenville, Kentucky) are too small a collection to be of much assistance.

The Greenville (Ky.) Leader had complete files from 1926 and proved exceedingly helpful as did the Bill Walker Interview of July 23, 1973.

Of little use were Thomas C. Clark, A History of Kentucky (Lexington, 1960), and Charles VanDoren, et. al., eds., Webster's Guide to American History (Springfield, Mass., 1971).